

Interim Evaluation of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory

I. Overview of Activities and Background

The evaluation visit to Appalachian Educational Laboratory took place on April 12-16, 1999 in Charleston, West Virginia. The background materials were reviewed and the rating sheets completed prior to the visit.

The regional lab (REL) is a part of AEL, a nonprofit corporation serving the four states of Virginia, Tennessee, West Virginia and Kentucky which was established in 1966 in the initial lab and center competition. The specialty area of the REL is rural education. AEL and REL share vision, resources, personnel and a building.

AEL is located in downtown Charleston and has been housed in the same place for over thirty years. The REL, the ERIC Clearing house and other AEL projects are located in this same building. Offices are spread across several floors, but project offices are by and large together.

The vision of AEL is that of “a world that nurtures a lifetime of learning for everyone”. To this end, AEL hopes to establish schools and communities where continuous improvement takes place. They aim to do this by the dissemination of applied research that joins the “wisdom of practice with the knowledge from research”. The projects at AEL aim to bring this objective about by addressing the issues of their stakeholders with strategies that research has found to be effective. They maintain a distinctly regional focus. AEL, according to the current executive director does not aspire to become nationally known. The executive director stated that “ We are terribly rural”. Given this, the service to the four-state region is its first priority. Also, AEL is not, as the executive director notes, an R&D center, but a corporation. As such it only has resources to the extent that it is meeting

the needs of its constituency.

The overall work of the lab is directed by a Board of Directors who represent the various stakeholders in the region served by AEL. There are seven representatives per state, including the chief state school officer or designate, a representative for the school administration association, teacher education association and 3 at large representatives. The board is actively involved in setting policy and direction for the lab. In the discussion with the Board of Directors, several members stressed that active involvement did not mean that they micro-managed the lab. The board links the corporation to its constituency in very concrete ways. For example, board members may nominate schools for participation in projects of the lab.

The relationship between the lab (REL) and the corporation (AEL) is both separable yet intertwined. REL and AEL share resources, mission, governance structures and a building. The regional REL is the core of the AEL, comprising 45% of the funding total. REL uses AEL to support its efforts. For example, a math and science consortium in the regional lab might not be engaged in direct involvement with the schools but could call on experts at AEL to support this process and work in REL. AEL supports the programs of the REL. The Executive Director, noting the potential interpretation that REL might look like the marketing tool for AEL remarked that they “never set out to create saleable products but to create solution to the regions’ needs.”

The executive director has been at AEL for some 25 years and is stepping down this summer. They have reorganized the corporate structure somewhat in order to accommodate a transition period. A new director has apparently been named. The transition plan seems to be worked out, although it appears that, as is normal, there is still some change going on in the reorganization plan. There are also a number of key staff who have been there for many years.

The staff communicates via e-mail. The Executive Director noted that he tracks the e-mail

of the resident directors in order to keep a heads up on how the work is going. Staff are assigned to projects. On average, staff are assigned to about 3 projects. The lab utilizes consultants where it makes sense to do so to staff a particular project.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the regional lab (REL) doing what it is approved to do?

At this interim reporting period, the lab appears to be performing adequately to above expectations in fulfilling the details of the original proposal and modifications, with the possible exception of the rural specialty. The work appears to be completed in a timely fashion, although the original proposal did not provide exact deliverable dates, so this is somewhat difficult to assess. When a project is delayed, the reasons for the delay are usually noted in the quarterly project report. For example, the Kentucky Writing project experienced a minor delay waiting for the evaluation data from the Kentucky Department of Education which was noted and explained in the quarterly report. Similarly, QUEST was delayed due to the leave of absence of a key staff member. Also QUEST began as a project operating in four states, but due to the availability of Goals 2000 dollars in West Virginia, became a project only in that state. This redirection of effort to West Virginia had an impact on studies originally proposed, although this was not as clear to figure out. For example, The Prisoners of Time proposal vanished.

Strengths:

The outstanding strength of this regional lab is its clear vision, focus and unwavering attention to its mission of serving the Appalachian region over the last 33 years. It has been institutionalized in the region.

The ability to effectively collaborate with various stakeholders and to form strategic alliances

is another important strength of this regional educational lab. The REL is actively collaborating with other labs, including SEDL, NWREL, as well as state Departments of Education, most intensively with the Kentucky State Department of Education. The staff of the laboratory are excellent in networking and making strategic alliances among the education community. For example, the QUEST project uses this strategic networking ability to successfully join together schools, teachers, and students in an innovative school change process. Another example of effective network is the Comprehensive School Reform network which is linking together schools and others engaged in comprehensive school reform under the comprehensive school reform, Obey-Porter legislation.

The Lab uses previous history and work in the region to leverage its continued work in region. REL capitalizes on its past accomplishments. For example, the current KERA project is a longitudinal offshoot of the original KERA work begun in 1990. This work was started when the legislature and other state officials realized they had not incorporated a feedback cycle in the original legislation. Fortunately, for the study of school reform, the AEL group was able to respond to this need. The data and methods from that study are continued into the present project now being continued under the REL. Significantly, what started as a “fill in until the legislature fixes this mistake” project has turned into a valuable and singularly important longitudinal study of school reform that is valuable nationally.

The Lab is addressing significant issues in educational change, such as the effects of mandated school reform in Kentucky, and the development of tools and processes for school change and renewal in QUEST and CSRD.

The staff and management create an organizational climate that is supportive of each other and is committed to improving the life chances of children in the region it serves. The organizational climate helps reinforce the belief system and vice versa.

Areas of needed improvement:

Despite an overall positive view of the implementation and management, there are two areas of concern to be noted:

- 1) There is a lack of integration and consistent networking across projects. Although such things as retreats, Learning Labs and meetings of senior staff on a regular basis do take place, there is still a lack of awareness or use of a product developed in one project in another project. The different projects seem to rarely be customers for each other within REL. Across project communication needs to happen by design, not by chance.
- 2) Although the transition to a new executive director is well planned, possible deleterious effects of the transition, especially on the value and supportive climate of REL, should be monitored.

Recommendations for improvement:

- 1) Address issue of project isolation directly by looking for potential areas of cross project collaboration and design a specific program with measurable goals to accomplish this.
- 2) No specific recommendation, except that other changes suggested for the lab should take into account that there will be a transition period. For example, consider the recommendation to change the lab focus to be more national in scope. Although this may be a good idea, changing the focus at this time may be a terrible idea as the lab, which has been a remarkably stable place, is undergoing a significant change in leadership.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

The REL excels in using a self-monitoring process to give feedback on customer needs. It uses a variety of methods to gain feedback from its clients. There are customer satisfaction surveys, focus groups, internal reviews, external reviews, quality assurance control systems, advisory panels and a diligent board of governors. In addition, there is typically extensive pilot testing of products, if appropriate to do so as in the case of development of professional development materials. It also has in place a performance review process for staff. The brief task description taken from the technical proposal outlines the approach taken to self-monitoring and is reproduced below. This is

an overall strength of the REL.

Task 1.2 Performance monitoring

Project performance review every four months

Project advisory committee meetings

Personnel performance review

Task 1.3a Quality assurance

Product quality review board

Complex review requires external review board, simple review does not stand alone.

Products require complex review issue papers, notes from the field, occasional papers, workshop packages

External reviewers must represent substantive expert and someone who is intended audience

Also use expert panels and focus groups early in development

Task 1.3b Evaluation

Formative evaluation - implementation

Summative evaluation - impact

GTR (Goal Tracking Record data collection system customer contacts)

Surveys with Western Michigan States assistance - mandated from RFP

Educator and administrator survey FY 96

SEA/LEA/schools survey

Summative evaluation- impact
overall satisfaction
skills

information sharing

use in planning

use in implementation

indirect benefits

Secondary clients use in implementation

External evaluation with Western Michigan

Third year evaluation or interim evaluation

Task 1.4 Planning

Project planning - internal if <100 days, external > 100 days

Has regular in house evaluations, third-party audits and advisory committee oversight

Strengths:

The REL consistently seeks feedback for its products and services from the clients. Descriptions of most products will indicate the type of review it has undergone. They also consistently seek feedback from clients once the product is in the field. The self-monitoring process exceeds expectations. In addition, the feedback is carefully designed to help improve the product. As such, questions are asked that can be analyzed and actually used to alter the product. For example, the CSRD workshop uses a combination of Likert type scale items and open-ended questions to locate the strength and weaknesses of the product or training.

The advisory panels also appear to work as conceived. In our conversation with Fred Hess, a member of the national advisory panel for KERA, he indicated that they met annually as a group, but conferred on a need be basis perhaps three or four other times a year. They also took advantage of AAA and AERA meetings to get together informally. Minutes of the advisory board meeting for KERA indicate a lively exchange about the conduct of specific research ideas. The REL is to be commended for convening this external advisory panel.

Areas of needed improvement:

Feedback from parents and students is not incorporated to the same extent as are other stakeholders.

Recommendations:

Increase attention to feedback from parents and students.

III. Quality

A. To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

The certification by the NDN (National Diffusion Network) of QUILT is one example of external validation of the quality of this product. This was done earlier and not on the current clock, but demonstrates that the organization wants to develop techniques/products that have demonstrated quality that can be validated by a known process.

One measure of the quality of the work is the reputation that the Lab has for excellent, unbiased and useful work. Conversations with various state stakeholders revealed a common thread of trust in the research of AEL and belief that they are unbiased in their approach and fair in their conclusions. The REL's work represents the gold standard for quality work for these policymakers.

There is a need to consider audience in any discussion of quality. The audience for many of

the REL's reports are primarily policymakers, legislators, and other state stakeholders interested in education. As such, the reports are not intended to be full-blown research reports. Consequently, the reviews of the literature document the research base for products and services, but typically in a very brief way. Also, theory is usually not developed in all that detail, which may be appropriate given the audience.

Another example of somewhat abbreviated treatment of prior research is the QUEST work. For example, other organizational development models that are similar to QUEST are not mentioned. This may be a fruitful literature for the REL to connect to, as there is a fair amount of work on using these models in school change, which may be relevant.

The REL does seek to minimize duplication of effort. For example, it was indicated that there was a request for a meta-analysis of the class size research. The REL did not set out to write a review, but instead to locate a current review and thereby reducing duplication of effort.

In summary, the REL does provide current reviews of the literature as background for work, but this background appears to be presented in an abbreviated form. Publication of materials in refereed journals is not frequent, and does not seem to be a priority for them. When asked about this, it was explained that the REL was not a university R&D Center, but a corporation and that there are different objectives. The emphasis is on kids, not on publications. There does not appear to be a push to publish in refereed journals. Authors do participate in annual meetings of the Anthropology Association and AERA.

The REL uses to good advantage a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods in its studies. In the qualitative area, the studies rely upon observation, interview and document review and the triangulation of these sources. Traditional quantitative methods include examination of reliability and factor analytic structure of scales used in traditional surveys. These are well-documented

approaches and used in a productive combination in the research. Also pilot testing and revision suggest intention to develop quality product.

On the other hand, the study designs seem to change sometimes and one needs to hunt for the justification or discussion. For example, in the Kentucky project that developed writing portfolios, the number of schools to be the base of study changed from 100 in the proposal to about 25 in the report. As noted earlier, given that the audience is not necessarily a research one, it may be appropriate to reduce discussion of methodology, although the study design and research plan should be accessible for the interested reader. There was no readily available consideration of the sample size reduction or whether this was a large enough size for the study at hand. Also, information about the characteristics of the districts in the KERA study were not provided, but this may have been for confidentiality reasons. Similarly, information about the interview protocols were not presented, to the best of my knowledge.

For relevant studies, there is an evaluation standards checklist included which indicates whether specific standards were taken into account in the study. This includes some 30 items such as stakeholder identification, evaluator credibility, practical procedures, rights of human subjects, impartial reporting, and meta-evaluation.

A report may go through several internal review iterations before it is approved, as was the case with several papers in our briefing materials. If appropriate, a methodological review will also be undertaken.

The KERA longitudinal study represents a coherent set of questions that have been looked at since 1990 about the implementation of the reform effort in Kentucky. It is also appropriate as the reform matures to look at questions related to how the implementation is affecting teaching and learning. To this end, the KERA study is redirecting its focus to these questions.

On the whole, the REL is producing quality work. More attention could be given to publication in referred journals and getting more national attention for their work. Such a push needs to be balanced against the goals and resources of the organization.

Strengths:

Studies are built upon understandings of the literature and effective practices, the researchers develop quality designs and instruments, utilize multiple, appropriate methods and address topics of national as well as regional importance.

Areas of needed improvement:

None

Recommendations:

None

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are products and services useful to and used by customers?

REL appears to provide very useful products for its clients. A product can be developed either because a client requests it, or because the REL perceives a need for development, or there can be co-development.

The REL provided an example of how they responded to a commissioner of education's request for information on a certain topic. They were able to put together a balanced, comprehensive review of the literature, coupled with some specific data analyses in about a week, an impressive response time. People on the REL staff are a great resource for knowing who to contact, or how to locate relevant data sources.

At the other extreme, REL developed, on their own initiative, a policy brief that explained

how schools can be hooked up to the internet and other services as a part of the Bell Atlantic and Public Service Commission's settlement. This policy brief was sent to over 14,000 customers.

Collaborations also result in the development of very useful products. REL, in concert with SERVE and Vanderbilt University, is developing training modules to help schools in the application process for CSRD program monies. The goal here is to build capacity into the local school or district so that they can be resources. The REL is also going back to schools/districts that did not succeed in their application process to help them in the next round. In addition, there will be an External Facilitators Academy to train people to assist schools to build their capacity to continuously improve as a part of the CSRD legislation.

In many cases, the instigation for the use of the product or for participation in a study was initiated by a contact from REL. This was true for QUEST and for the CSRD projects as well.

The products are available in a variety of modes. For example, QUILT has been developed into a video series. Audiotapes are also available. Video conferencing is used to connect to the field effectively for training or discussion. During the review session, we interacted via video conferencing with two schools that were using QUEST. There are several listserves and websites.

Internet hits provide another, albeit unclear, measure of access to the REL services and products. They do monitor internet usage.

Strengths:

-significant products

The utility of the KERA project is increased because it is a longitudinal 10 year study, thus providing a large scale and unique set of data for policy uses.

-timely / responsive products

KERA

CSRD

-variety

KERA (study of)

QUEST (action research)

-accessible by variety of means

web pages

video

print

audiotapes

Areas in need of improvement:

Increase visibility of products to a national audience.

Recommendations:

None at this time

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

A goal tracking record (GTR) is included in each quarterly report. It includes counts by state and role of contacts to AEL. It breaks the contacts by PK-12 education, higher education, policymaker, community, and other agencies. It also breaks down the contacts by the client- centered goals - to provide information about products, to assist states in reform, and to assist schools. These are numbers for AEL. For the 4th quarter of 1998, they fielded 25,106 contacts to the field. With this information it is possible to tell in broad terms, who the customer base is.

The primary way in which the Lab appears to identify new clients is through its network of

associations in the four states. The board is influential in this process as they frequently identify or nominate schools for particular projects. Other ways in which clients are identified are through AEL staff, board members and state department of education members.

Customer evaluation of how well an event suited their needs is a routine part of the REL sponsored events. There is a system in place for getting feedback from users of the products or participants in the training. For example, in QUEST training, there is participant observation, interview over the phone, and an evaluation questionnaire that is delivered over the phone.

The REL in many cases develops products or services directly with the client as a joint and collaborative effort. The emphasis is not on solving problems per se, but on building capacity into the system.

Strengths:

REL involves clients in a meaningful way in the development of products and processes. They see themselves as co-developers of products and tools with the clients. This way of interfacing with schools grows out of and is consistent with their process orientation.

Areas of needed improvement:

None

Recommendations for improvement:

None

V. Outcomes and impacts

A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

The REL follows what might be called a process orientation. In their work, they do not aim

to provide a one size fits all, top down, “we are the experts” type of product. The AEL way, and the REL way as well, is more collaborative. They typically work with their clients to build capacity to continuously improve. They describe the process as dynamic and organic. A focus on student outcomes may be perceived as incompatible with this kind of process approach. For whatever reasons, while some work such as the Kentucky Writing Project will eventually address outcomes, others do to a lesser extent or not at all.

Some proof or indication of effects on student outcomes, however, is important to document. This is unevenly done across projects.

Strengths:

Projects are attending to student outcomes.

Areas in need of improvement:

A consistent focus on measurement of student outcomes is needed.

Recommendation:

Student outcomes can of course be considered broadly and need not be confined to results of traditional assessments. For example, the QUEST project could develop indicators that show how the tools it has developed affect student outcomes. In the presentation by the school, the power of the use of protocols, data in a day, and student led conferences became real. In other words, focusing on student outcomes doesn’t mean necessarily a presentation of the average NCE score for a school. But, the focus on student learning does need to be there.

B. To what extent does the REL assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school reform strategies?

The REL excels at working with schools and localities to implement comprehensive school reform. First, with their longstanding project focusing on KERA, they have provided insightful work

on the progress of implementation of the first significant state mandated school reform initiative in the nation. This information has been extremely useful in gauging how well the reform is taking in Kentucky rural schools and has been of direct help to the state of Kentucky. Interviews with state officials in Kentucky confirmed the important role that the REL has played in this school reform effort. Two quotes illustrate this point:

AEL has been a consistent voice in looking at Kentucky. There has been a lot of other research that has been done in a concentrated period of time and then the researcher goes away never to be seen again. AEL has provided a more comprehensive look at the underlying reasons for the patterns in the data. We trust these data.

AEL provided a quick response when others couldn't respond. AEL stepped forward in a timely way. We did not build feedback into the KERA legislation so that AEL filled a void until the legislature fixed this problem - the longitudinal side was very important for studying implementation over time. Their contribution was enormous.

Their role in creating school reform has also been considerable, as in the case of QUEST. Here, in an action research model, the REL provides tools and networks in a partnering relationship with schools seeking change from within.

The technical assistance to the state of Virginia to serve underachieving schools is another example of assistance to states and localities.

Finally, the collaborative activities under the CSRD initiatives directly affect comprehensive school reform.

Strengths:

Working with schools that have gotten early funding, have made strategic alliances with Vanderbilt and University of Memphis, are in position as the major provider of this sort of technical assistance work at this point in time.

In the right place at the right time and acted.

Areas of needed improvement:

Hopefully, as the REL assists states in comprehensive school reform, this endeavor can have a direction besides serving every school in the region. Why not be purposive about growth in assisting states to implement comprehensive school reform in order to learn something about when, where, and how reform works? To learn about how reform works, we need carefully crafted comparisons of conditions of effectiveness. How do you scale up unless you understand when things work. If one size does not fit all, are there no sizes that fit most?

Purposive selection of sites to add to the understandings of when and how reform works may be useful investment. Growth without such a plan just increases your workload without adding systematic information.

Recommendations:

Continue to assist states and localities, but select them in such a way that will magnify your chances of understanding when, where, and how comprehensive school reform works.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in the specialty area?

AEL has a strong reputation in the area of rural education due to its previous and continuing work in the ERIC Clearinghouse on rural education and employment of staff who have a strong record of scholarship as rural educators. This focus on rural education at AEL in the past has been distinctly regional in scope, focusing on conditions of rural areas in the southeast area which focuses on poverty and underserved populations. However, the RFP calls for programs and activities that reach a national audience and are broader in scope than the regional one. The strategy put in place at the REL is to develop a national audience and scope by regional expertise and work. They do this

by continuing their work in rural regional sites. They see that the KERA work is the “lighthouse work for rural education”.

The researchers claim that to establish a national reputation, they will link to the leadership of national interest in rural education and build a reputation and relationship with them. Penetrating the national leadership is a strategy to make the REL national in scope.

In the clarification questions for the REL competition, OERI asked how the offeror would leverage/transfer its experience in rural Appalachia to work in the Midwest, the Southeast and other parts of the country where the issues are different. The primary mechanisms are networking to the national leadership, continuation of the scholars program which is national in scope, hiring strategic personnel who are national in scope, and collaboration with the national Annenberg Rural Challenge. At the meeting with the panel, the REL stressed the association/organizational relationships and provided a 3-page list of such organizational linkages.

The staff note that most school reform models come from work in urban schools and that there needs to be an understanding of how assumptions of these models are built in and make them not fit with the situation in rural schools. For example, economies of scale that could be realized in an urban setting do not materialize in a rural one. Or, more importantly, many models assume that the goal is to solve problems not build capacity. They are working on a concept paper for CSRD which would be an important link of their rural perspective to the national scene.

Strengths:

National recognition in this area for rural studies in the region

Seeking to conceptualize national school reform movement for rural schools

Areas of needed improvement:

Need to clarify how the rural specialty is being linked to other studies and how the work of

the REL is national in scope.

Recommendations:

None

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products and Services

Overall, the REL is conducting an impressive array of timely and usable research and development work. In all the categories reviewed here, the REL was performing at or above expectations.

Strengths:

The overall strength of REL is the management structure, the responsiveness of the organization to client's needs, and the development of quality products on important. On issues of quality, utility and impact, the REL was seen to be performing at or above expectations.

Areas of needed improvement:

The national focus of the rural specialty needs clarification.

Cross project exchange of information, strategies needs to be more effectively done.

Recommendations:

The above two issues need to be addressed.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement and Strategies for Improvement

Strengths:

The outstanding strength of this regional lab is its clear vision, focus and unwavering attention to its mission of serving the Appalachian region over the last 33 years. It has an enviable reputation and a position of respect and trust among its constituents in the region and nationally. The staff and

the leadership at the REL are committed to the goal of bettering the life chances of the children in the areas they serve. This shared common vision, and effort toward it, help create another great strength of the lab, its positive organizational culture.

The ability to effectively collaborate with various stakeholders and to form strategic alliances is another important strength of this regional educational lab. The REL is actively collaborating with other regional labs, including SEDL, NWREL, many state Departments of Education and other interested parties to education. The staff of the laboratory are excellent networkers and are able to make strategic alliances among the education community.

The third strength is the ability to capitalize on past accomplishments to leverage continued work in the region. For example, what started as a “fill in until the legislature fixes this mistake” project on KERA has turned into a valuable and singularly important longitudinal study of school reform.

The fourth strength is that the REL is engaged in significant work, of high quality and utility. The new work associated with the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration is one example here.

Now, for five areas of needed improvement.

First, in the future, studies need to consider student outcomes and effects directly. The utility of the work is reduced because the effects on student outcomes are not considered. Granted there are complexities in studying and interpreting effects; however, it is still important to do. Also, effects do not have to be discussed only on traditional measures.

Second, more attention to selection of school sites should be given to insure variation in important demographic and contextual factors in the studies. Many times in the studies, schools seemed to be in a study because they were nominated by someone from AEL or the Board of

Directors. One advantage of purposive selection and recruitment of schools with certain demographics is that it could inform our understanding of what types of things seem to work in what kinds of schools. This could be valuable insight into your school reform work with CSRD.

Third, as was discussed many times over the last five days, there is a need for you to become clients for each other's work. Information about strategies, findings and myriad other things found in one project can and should inform the work in others

Fourth, the rural studies need to conceptualize regional and national rural studies in a consistent and meaningful way.

Finally, overall the work at REL is a good solid contribution and deserves a wider audience.